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FULLY AUTOMATED LUXURY INDIVIDUALIST ANARCHISM

NONPOLITICS CAPITAL, DERIVATIVE COMMUNISM, FINANCE, MARXISM, NON-FUTURE

Revolutionary Luxury, Bureaucratic Administration

Any politics that seeks an encompassing notion of liberation and freedom must, first and foremost, be oriented towards the future, and must pursue this horizon through goal-oriented actions. This effectively sets up a feedback system, linking together the shifting and modular futurity that is assembled by those who desire it with the concrete actions, revolutionary impulses, and insurrectionary acts that move towards its construction. In their most effective turns, future horizons are assembled as to remain open, as the very compounding of possibilities into an ever-increasing array of options. Still, though, certain motifs are deployed to act as anchors or signals for the widening of the possibility space.

One such memetic anchor that has received decent mileage in certain circles is “fully automated luxury communism” (FALC) – a utopian vision in which toil is eliminated through technology, capitalism is replaced by the communism, and, as described by Aaron Bastani in a 2015 article for Vice, ‘political adventurism’ culminates in “Cartier for everyone, MontBlanc for the masses, and Chloe for all.” FALC, in turn, is often spoken of in tandem with the left-accelerationism of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, its less-hyperbolic, more speculatively-inclined cousin.

With its demands for unbridled automation, universal basic income, and promethean mastery, Srnicek and Williams’ own futural politics are an attempt to revive (and auto-correct a few problematic points of) what Nick Dyer-Witherford refers to as “Red Plenty Platforms” – the various bids for ‘cybernetic communism’ like Oskar Lange’s planning recommendations for the Soviet Union, Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell’s “New Socialism”, Salvador Allende’s CyberSyn, and Michael Albert’s Parecon, among others.

While reviewing this list, what springs to mind is the undeniable presence of technocratic bureaucracies lurking behind the scenes, be it in the cumbersome infrastructure of Gosplan, the unintended class divisions that arose between workers and engineers during the course of CyberSyn, or the hellish *social bureaucracy* that Parecon would undoubtedly generate. Indeed, Dyer-Witherford writes that future cybernetic communisms must be more flexible and multi-scaled, and Srnicek and Williams follow suit in this regard.

For each of them, the *luxury of communism* is a freedom from work and the conditions of scarcity. This places their technopolitics in a much larger trajectory, stretching backwards through Thorstein Veblen’s musings on the social necessity of a “soviet of engineers” to Fourier and Saint-Simon’s portrayal of socialism as the “administration of things”. For the left-accelerationists and their kin, the amplification of technology will gradually remove the need for bureaucracy that ran through the writings and reflections of their forebears.

Such tendencies are common for those operating in Marxist, neo-Marxist, and ever post-Marxist trajectories – and more often that not, the contradictions between the proposed plans for libertarian freedom and the expansion of bureaucratic authoritarianism that these solutions would call into being are not probed nearly enough. It’s hard to see how utilizing the currently existing infrastructures of the world can be steered into realizing a utopian, futural politics on a mass scale. It’s equally difficult to see how the grandeur of capitalism production, as it currently stands, embodies the *hyperstitional* (that is, the epistemic, constructive horizon of certain politics actions) draw that could shake the left from its stupor.

With that in mind, what I want to do now is try to pry open a space in which certain insights from these thinkers can be salvaged and pushed in a new direction, away from a future-oriented politics based on existing trends in the development of productive technologies, and towards one based on new infrastructures and new technologies. To do this, however, we first have to turn that most contentious of figures: Karl Marx.

Marx Against Labor

In his book *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Marxist theorist Moishe Postone offers an extensive critique of 'traditional Marxism' (that is, the reading of Marxism that allegedly leads to Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, etc.) and a thorough reinterpretation of communist theory. Like Antonio Negri and the autonomists, Postone grounds his approach not in the three volumes of *Capital*, but in the *Grundrisse*, Marx's unpublished and less known manuscript that laid out the full scope of his project.

Radical scholars have long considered the Marx of the *Grundrisse* to be different from – and far more radical than – the Marx of *Capital*, with the work offering an alternative methodology, set of concerns, and even articulation of what 'communism' is intended to be. For Negri, the *Grundrisse* illustrates the way that the working class (understood here not only in terms of the industrial proletariat, but the collective labor of society as a whole) operates autonomously *within and against* capitalism.ⁱ By contrast, Postone argues that Marx's critique is not so much a critique of capitalism from the point of view of labor, but "critique of labor in capitalism".ⁱⁱ

In *Capital*, Marx presents as the contradiction eating at the heart of capitalism as one between the "forces of production" and the way the output of from these forces is distributed – in other words, between the mass production of commodities and the market system that distributes them.

Postone illustrates that this so-called 'contradiction' is of significantly less importance in the *Grundrisse*. In this work, it is the contradiction between *labor-time* and machine production. Postone draws our attention to the way that Marx analyses labor and production *temporally*: what Marx (very problematically) referred to as 'value' was simply the magnitude of labor-time expended in the production process, for which a wage is received.

At the same time, however, capitalist production is constantly revolutionizing production through the development of technology that both lessens the central position of labor and shortens the time spent working. In "The Fragment on Machines", the *Grundrisse*'s best known passage, Marx dons his futurist caps and tries to anticipate the horizon of this tendency:

*...once adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the machine, or rather, an automatic system of machinery... set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself; this automaton consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.*ⁱⁱⁱ

For this Marx, it is not so much the socialization of wealth that is the defining characteristic of communism, but the liberation from labor that occurs by way of the development of a post-capitalist technology of production: labor-time approaching zero. At the same time, however, we cannot absolve this distinctively more libertarian Marx of the celebration of technocracy and bureaucracy that has been hitched to the concept(s) of socialism and communism. It still remains a moneyless system based on the *overcoming* of the 'blind anarchy of the market' by way of 'rationalization of production' – though it should be said that Marx of the *Grundrisse* is more ambivalent to rationalization and bureaucracy than the Marx of *Capital*.

What matters in the *Grundrisse* is the development of science itself, which is labeled as arising not from the brilliance of individuals, but from the "social brain" or "general intellect" of society.^{iv} Marx implies that the movement towards 'rational production' is incubated within capitalism, arising from the tendency of "manufacture and heavy industry" to seek the "employment of scientific power" in order to transfer "the communal spirit of labor... to the machine."^v

It is at this point that Marxian theory reveals itself as a prototype of 'fully automated luxury communism'. The transfer of science into the machine "will redound to the benefit of emancipated labor, and is the condition of its emancipation."^{vi} This is because not only does the process of automation – which is precisely what Marx is describing here – drives labor-time downwards;ⁱⁱⁱ it is also because it rapidly expands the capacities of production itself. It, in other words, lessens the existence of scarcity.

It is for this reason that we repeatedly find Marxists praising the infrastructures that allow mass production and heavy industry. Case in point is Engels himself, who suggested in "On Authority" that development pulled inexorably towards "large-scale industry and large-scale agriculture", and that seeking to step into another path of development constituted nothing less than "wanting to abolish industry itself, to destroy the power loom in order to return to the spinning wheel".^{vii}

Such arguments foreshadowed those of the Austro-Marxist economist Rudolf Hilferding, who wrote in his 1910 book *Finance Capital* that the corporation was an example of capitalism overcoming the 'inefficiencies' of free competition through the combination of monopoly privileges, technological expertise, and 'rational administration'. "A corporation," he wrote, "is able... to organize its plant according to purely technical considerations, whereas the individual entrepreneur is always restricted... The corporation can thus be equipped in a technically superior fashion, and can maintain this technical superiority."^{viii}

Hilferding's insights influenced, in turn, Marxist revolutionaries like Vladimir Lenin (who consciously sought to build "state capitalism" in the Soviet Union) and even non-Marxist economists like Joseph Schumpeter (who had argued that the many the free competition of many firms was inferior to limited competition between large, industrial and financial combines).

There are also a distinctive similarities between Marx of the *Grundrisse* and the economic theories of Veblen, writing as he was

around the same time as Hilferding. Just as Marx saw developments in science and technology arising from a “social brain” or “general intellect”, Veblen described a “technological heritage” of society, from which the “machine process” emerged – that is, “the systematic organization of production and the reasoned application of knowledge”.^{ix}

The latter point is vitally important (and not only to Marxists and Veblen-inspired technocrats, as I will illustrate shortly), as it draws together a sweeping vision that unifies creativity and desire with the compiling of techniques and technics for operating in the world. Veblen stressed how along the competitive pressures of *business*, there exists a tendency for cooperation (which he aligns, perhaps misleadingly, with *industry*) in the bringing together of “all [the] branches of knowledge that have to do with the material sciences”.^x

For Veblen, the result of this cooperation and integration was twofold. First, it sowed the seeds for future cooperation and integration through the deepening and expanding of the technological heritage. Second, it brought to the fore the needs for ‘rational management’ by way of a class of engineers – effectively bring us to a set of concerns that paralleled (but did not map directly on) the snaking path of Marxist thought towards technocratic administration. The so-called Technocrats, followers of Veblen who split into their own left and right wings, took these insights further. Lewis Mumford, the best known of the left-Technocrats, saw the accumulation of knowledge and the integration of production processes as opening up the possibility for a state of affairs quite similar to that posed by fully automated luxury communism:

When automatism becomes general and the benefits of mechanization are socialized, men will be back once more in the Edenlike state in which they existed in regions of natural increment, like the South Seas: the ritual of leisure will replace the ritual of work, and work itself will become a kind of game. That is, in fact, the ideal goal of a completely mechanized and automatized system of power production: the universal achievement of leisure.^{xi}

Knowledge Ecologies and Economies

Knowledge does indeed have a ‘social base’ (insofar as we can meaningfully talk of ‘society’ as something other than an abstraction). It contains emergent properties, arising as it does in a second-order manner, within the thick of the interactions, negotiations, and labors between peoples and the ecosystems in which they are embedded. It unfolds in iterations, passing from rule-of-thumb observations and fixes (*metis*) to more concrete, formulaic frameworks (*techne*) before heading back again, the two cutting across one another in a perpetual *mangle*.^{xii}

Such a dance of agency can be highlighted, as Veblen correctly observed, by the figure of the machine itself, which marks the passage of knowledge into an assemblage of materials in a way that produces a technical object or artifact. Furthermore, it is the accumulation and transformation of such objects or artifacts themselves that form part of the tapestry of this ‘technological heritage’ or ‘social brain’ as it unfolds through time and sows the seeds for future inventions or innovations.

Consider, for instance, Lewis Mumford’s suggestion that the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century was itself contingent upon a mass of innovations that had been accumulating for centuries ranging from the developments in mining during the 16th century (“More closely than any other industry, mining was bound up with the first development of modern capitalism”) to the monastic invention of the clock in the 14th century (“The clock... is the key-machine of the modern industrial age”), among many others.^{xiii}

This drive to destabilize the traditional forms of organizing and behaving by technically altering our interactions can be described in many ways. For Marx, it was innate nature of our “species-being”, and for Veblen, it was the drive of “creativity” at its most immediate and applicable (Personally, I prefer Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of “desire”, which they characterize as a productive, generative force).

Whatever term we utilize, it is clear that the underlying problem with Marx and Veblen’s formulas is that they both to the notion that the deployment of the human faculties moves directly to large-scale, intensive industry based on the careful management of human, technological, and economic variables. Perhaps it easy to see why, writing as they were during the times of large-scale prometheanism, of expansive factory systems and gigantic infrastructures. Even today such systems reign supreme – as a 2015 report from the Brookings Institution has shown, the markets of the so-called frictionless “new economy” are still dominated by massive firms, different only in their forefathers by their degree of technological integration (!) and tendency to employ a much-smaller work force.

Regardless, the actual existence of this system – this megamachine, as Mumford would have called it – must be separated from any philosophies of technological determinism or historical inevitability. Desire, even at its most technologically oriented, need not lead directly to the big blast furnace, the corporate (or state) planning board, or the exploitation of pauperized labor forces. Carlota Perez tells us that “the space of the technologically possible is much greater than that of the economically profitable and socially acceptable” – but as a neo-Schumpeterian, she takes such a reality as a given, as the megastuctures and cyclical economic patterns that she (correctly) identifies as being driven by the organic intertwining of ‘path-dependent’ technology and consumer demand.

Not so, Stephen Marglin argued back in the 1970s. Drawing on examples ranging from work organization in mills the development of factory systems at the end of the feudal era to the Soviet’s collectivization of agriculture, he suggested that there

existed a tendency for the “economically and politically powerful classes” to steer innovation in a way that is congenial to maintaining power not only at the molar level, but the molecular level of the everyday. Earlier still, Mumford had argued that despotic power relations forced the trajectories of technological development into frameworks that best served the ruling classes.

Amongst the primary means through which these trajectories are set into motion are the granting of monopoly privileges by the state – and in particular, patent, copyright, and other so-called ‘intellectual property’ protections. If knowledge and technology are emergent from a social strata and evolve through time, then these monopoly privileges act as the *capture* of particular flows in this ecosystem. It, in other words, allows certain actors to enclose a slice of the ‘general intellect’ and banish others from utilizing, reproducing, or improving upon it – unless the proper rents are extracted, of course.

What systems such as these do is not only keep a tight – if ultimately informal – regulation on technological development, but help maintain the subordination of the mass of laborers to the handful of wealthy capitalists. Consider, for example, the enforcement of intellectual property law on a global level, first through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, then through the World Trade Organization (and the various ‘free trade deals’ that it negotiates).

While billed as the globalization of market economies, what these mechanisms have done is globalize *methods of exclusion*. In the case of intellectual property laws, the already-existing uneven development between the so-called ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ worlds is exacerbated by the forcing of the developing world to rely on the knowledge and technology of the developed world.

Or consider the way that the intellectual output of the academy – so often fueled by the public coffers – is so often seized and locked away by private corporations adjacent to the university system. This privatization of the very labor of generating knowledge (in a space that highlights the ‘social nature’ of knowledge itself!) ranges from the material advancements being churned out at places like MIT and Stanford to the very records of research and development in every field. Countless journal articles, abstracts, theses, and other ephemera that form the substratum of the *knowledge infrastructures* vanish from public eye, rarely seen except by those who shell out the large sums demanded by the pay-walls (or by those who have found/cultivated means of circumventing them).

Innumerable scientists, engineers, academics of all stripes, and activists have spoken out again and again against the caustic effects of these enclosures, highlighting in particular the ways in which they have effectively stymied research and development. Quite often the lack of access to particular tools and knowledge-pools has led would-be developers to have to re-invent the wheel, so to speak, in a way that does not infringe on the ‘property’ of others – a turn that has assisted in pushing the costs associated with research and development through the roof, thus blocking out many from ever being able to begin work in the first place (and beholding those who do embark on the path of research and development to large corporate firms and investor interests). Not only does this help maintain top-heavy, specialization-intensive industrial paradigms, but assists in reproducing the spectacular figure of the heroic entrepreneur.

Speculative Futures

Pushing back against this destructive tendency, *Charlotte Hess puts forward an understanding of information and knowledge* as capable of being a “pure public good – nonrival and free to all.” Moving in similar waters, the musician *Brian Eno has described the way that* new and novel forms and tendencies tend to emerge quite spontaneously from open social and cultural networks that freely share information and tools – a phenomenon that he dubbed “scenius”. Scenius increases the unpredictability of innovation and enhances its dynamic nature while also highlighting the role that engaged knowledge-pools play in ‘priming the pump’ for such situations. One can only imagine that under the scenario of knowledge and information being treated as a ‘pure public good’, the way in which speed and complexity of innovation would accelerate.

Re-orientating knowledge back into a more commons-based, self-propelling frame will not be enough to redirect the path of industrial development. A series of other factors must be taken into consideration – such as access to start-up funding, the form this funding takes, etc., etc., – but these are beyond the scope of this article here. What I want to emphasize is the way that dismantling the intellectual property regime is the precondition for the cultivation of a *generalized and diffused socio-technical literacy* – something that, in turn, would considerably increase the array of options presented to every individual.

Socio-technical literacy, in other words, lends itself to the amplification of positive liberties, the exercising of *freedom to*. It thus becomes the precise opposite of the dreams of automated dreams of the Marxists, the Veblenites and the more recent left-accelerationists, for whom technological development heads towards a state of negative liberty, the experience of *freedom from*.

In such a state of affairs, what would become of the large-scale industrial infrastructures of today? If individuals had the know-how, or at least access to means to gain know-how, to produce, live, and trade without recourse to the precarity of the present, would they continue to toil for others? It may be a bit of stretch to declare the end of wage-labor, but it seems obvious that if people have to capacity to have their own means of production, then selling their labor-power to the members of the ruling class would decline.

On that ground, it seems that when Srnicek and William discuss a “bricolage approach” to technological development, one of

“cobbling together something new” from the old,^{xiv} it is less Allende’s CyberSyn (which is precisely what they were describing in this passage) and more akin to the bottom-up and decentralized production systems discussed by Kevin Carson in his *Homebrew Industrial Revolution* that should come to mind. Indeed, radically decentralized, stigmergic production and distribution, which cedes as much control as possible to autonomous agents, serve as a far better sociotechnical and economic horizon for militant politics.

For what it is worth, Srnicek and Williams come close to this by suggesting that “any postcapitalist economy will require flexibility in both production (for example, additive manufacturing) and distribution (for example, just-in-time logistics). This enables an economy to be responsive to changes in individual consumption, unlike the grand and inflexible efforts of the Soviet era.”^{xv}

But despite these forward-facing moments, the overall left-accelerationist position has remained wedded too close the visions of Fordist excess, be it the hints of Soviet nostalgia, the retro-Keynesianism, or the notion of fully automated luxury communism. When additive manufacturing and related techniques appear, it always seems to be relegated to a lesser position, an afterthought or footnote. It’s odd to see the “red plenty platforms” embrace the question of flexibility, but rarely address the question of scale (which of course is to what the question of flexibility is intimately bound to).

So instead of redressed communism, how about a new hyperstitional configuration: *fully automated individualist anarchism*. Instead of using the mass industrial system as its launching point (which is, at the end of the day, little more than a symptom of capitalism’s *repression* of technoscientific development, not its apex), this mode of *insurrectionary* technopolitics will look towards an as-yet unformed productive system whose genesis lies in the shops, garages, basements, and pop-up labs in anonymous urban zones and boring suburbs (and not to mention already-existing spaces such as Italy’s Emilia-Romagna or China’s Shenzhen!)

An intellectual lineage can even be crafted, beginning perhaps with Marx’s observations on technology and scientific knowledge in the *Grundrisse*, but augmented through Hayekian knowledge problems and positive-liberty philosophies. Fully automated individualist anarchism even comes with ready-made slogans. Instead of “all power to the Soviets”, how about “all power to the general intellect”? Instead of a “world to win”, why not a “future to design”? We have targets for immediate action, be the creation of knowledge commons or the setting-up of funding systems for technological development, so why let the Marxists and technocrats claim anti-work politics for their own?

After all, it is at this late stage, as sclerotic capitalism teeters on the precipice of its fragile plateau and the climate slides from bad to worse, that we can safely say that anarchism must be a futurism, and that the future must be anarchist. Let’s get to work.

iSee Antonio Negri *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons from the Grundrisse* Autonomedia, 1992

iiMoishe Posotne *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* Cambridge University Press, 1996, pg. 6

iiiKarl Marx *Grundrisse* Penguin Books, 1973, pg. 692

ivIbid, pg. 694

vIbid, pg. 585

viIbid, pg. 701

viiFrederich Engels “On Authority”, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels *Collected Works*, Vol. 23 International Publishers, 1988, pg. 422; quoted in Kevin Carson *Organization Theory: A Libertarian Perspective* Center for a Stateless Society, 1998, pg. 17

viiiRudolf Hilferding *Finance Capitalism* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, pgs. 123-124

ixJonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler *Capital as Power: A Study of Order and Creorder* Routledge, 2009, pg. 219

xThorstein Veblen *The Theory of Business Enterprise* Augustus M. Kelley, 1976, pgs 7-8; quoted in *ibid*, pg. 220

xiLewis Mumford *Technics and Civilization* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1934, pg. 279

xiiThe dialectic of *metis* and *techne* – and the political, social, and economic dimensions of this dialectic – are discussed in James C. Scott *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* Yale University Press, 1999. On the “mangle” as a way of thinking through the dynamics of scientific development, see Andrew Pickering *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science* University of Chicago Press, 2010

xiiiTechnics and Civilization, 76, 14

xivNick Srnicek and Alex Williams *Inventing the Future* Verso, 2015, pg. 149. The longest reflection of additive manufacturing occurs in footnotes of the work: “The significant of 3D printing (additive manufacturing) lies in its generic capacity to create

complexity with a simple technology – anything from houses to jet engines to living organs can be created in this way. Second, its ability to drastically reduce the costs of construction (in terms of both material and labour) portend a new era in the building of basic infrastructures and housing. Finally, its flexibility is a significant advantage, overcoming the traditional costs associated with revamping fixed investment for new production lines.” (pg. 217, note 26). One wishes that this insights were given precedent over musings on technologies for economic planning.

xvIbid, pgs. 150-151

taken from here

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